PROTESTANT HOUR

SERMON #3 - SUMMARY

LOST AND FOUND

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

Scripture

Luke 15:1-10

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?"
Psalm 139:7a (RSV)

This sermon is based on two stories Jesus told about being lost and being found.

The good shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one who is lost; the woman who turns her house inside-out to find one lost coin, were striking descriptions of God in Jesus' time. They still are. They suggest that God searches for us, even while we are trying to hide: even while we are looking for God, it is God

ing.

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pherd and the woman searching for

the function of religion to

God and to be particularly care-

God is always seeking.

[need Job
Scripture

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PROTESTANT HOUR, #3

LOST AND FOUND

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

SCRIPTURE

LUKE 15:1-10

"WHITHER SHALL I GO FROM THY SPIRIT?"

-PSALM 139:7A (RSV)

THERE IS SOME PRETTY GOOD THEOLOGY IN ROBERT FULGHUM'S DELIGHTFUL BEST-SELLER, ALL I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN.

FULGHUM REMINISCES ABOUT PLAYING HIDE-AND-SEEK WITH HIS NEIGHBORHOOD CHUMS ON AN AM OCTOBER SATURDAY EVENING LONG AGO.

HE REMEMBERS THAT THERE WAS ALWAYS ONE YOUNGSTER WHO HID HIMSELF SO EFFECTIVELY THAT NO ONE FOUND HIM AND THE OTHERS - THE SEEKERS - BECAME IRRITATED

WITH HIM AND GAVE UP. FULGHUM THINKS THAT LITTLE BOY MAY STILL BE HIDING SOMEWHERE.

HE REFLECTS: "AS I WRITE THIS, THE NEIGHBORHOOD GAME GOES ON, AND THERE IS A KID UNDER A PILE OF LEAVES IN THE YARD JUST UNDER MY WINDOW. HE HAS BEEN THERE A LONG TIME NOW, AND EVERYBODY ELSE IS FOUND AND THEY ARE ABOUT TO GIVE UP ON HIM OVER AT THE BASE. I CONSIDERED GOING OUT TO THE BASE AND TELLING THEM WHERE HE IS HIDING. AND I THOUGHT ABOUT SETTING THE LEAVES ON FIRE TO DRIVE HIM OUT. FINALLY, I JUST YELLED, 'GET FOUND, KID!' OUT THE WINDOW. AND SCARED HIM SO BAD HE STARTED CRYING AND RAN HOME TO TELL HIS MOTHER." [P. 56-57]

THIS IS A SERMON ABOUT GETTING LOST AND GETTING FOUND. IT HAS ALWAYS OCCURRED TO ME THAT THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING LOST THAT

IS MORE POWERFUL THAN IT SHOULD BE. THERE ARE SURELY FEW THINGS MORE FRUSTRATING OR DISCONCERTING.

SOMETIMES BEING LOST CAN BE HUMILIATING, PARTICULARLY IF YOU HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS OR FRIENDS IN THE CAR RELYING ON YOUR SURE SENSE OF DIRECTION. THE STANDARD WAY TO HANDLE IT, OF COURSE, IS TO KEEP DRIVING WITH CONFIDENCE, UNDER NO CONDITION ADMIT THAT YOU'RE LOST, NEVER STOP TO ASK DIRECTIONS; KEEP DRIVING FASTER...SOMETHING IS SURE TO TURN UP.

I SUPPOSE THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT BEING LOST THAT FORCES THE ISSUE OF ONE'S VULNERABILITY, FALLIBILITY, MORTALITY EVEN. YOU KNOW THAT THERE IS NO THREAT TO LIFE, THAT IT'S SIMPLY A MATTER OF COLLECTING YOUR THOUGHTS, GETTING DIRECTIONS, AND ALL, SOONER OR LATER, WILL BE WELL.

SOMEONE TOLD ME RECENTLY THAT DEEP IN ALL OF US, RELATED TO THE FEAR OF SEPARATION AND REJECTION THAT SIGMUND FREUD IDENTIFIED AS THE SOURCE OF OUR ANXIETY, IS A FEAR OF LOSTNESS. OFTEN IT IS RELATED TO, OR AMPLIFIED BY AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE. I REMEMBER THE DAY WE MOVED TO A NEW NEIGHBORHOOD AND I WAS TAKEN TO SCHOOL WITH CAREFUL INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT HOW TO FIND MY WAY HOME. I GOT LOST. I REMEMBER WALKING IN STRANGE TERRITORY FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE A VERY LONG TIME, KNOWING THAT I WAS BECOMING MORE LOST. I ALSO RECALL HEARING THE FAMILIAR WHISTLE AND THE RELIEF AND JOY WHEN I LOOKED DOWN A HILLY STREET AND SAW MY FATHER, LOOKING FOR ME.

JESUS WAS A MASTER STORY TELLER. ONE TIME HE DREW ON THE POWER OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF LOSTNESS AND TOLD A

SEQUENCE OF UNFORGETTABLE VIGNETTES. THEY ARE FAMILIAR FAVORITES. THE FIRST IS ABOUT A LOST SHEEP AND A SHEPHERD WHO FINDS IT. THE SECOND IS ABOUT A LOST COIN AND A WOMAN WHO LOOKS UNTIL SHE FINDS IT. THE THIRD IS ABOUT A FATHER WHO HAS TWO SONS, ONE OF WHOM LEAVES HOME AND IS LOST IN A FAR COUNTRY UNTIL HE DECIDES TO RETURN TO HIS FATHER'S HOUSE; AND THE ELDER SON WHO STAYS HOME BUT IS EQUALLY, MORE SERIOUSLY LOST ACTUALLY, BY REASON OF HIS OWN RESENTMENT.

TOGETHER THOSE VIGNETTES REPRESENT A VERY NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT GOD AND ABOUT RELIGION... THEY WERE PROMPTED BY A TENSION WHICH IS PRESENT AND MOUNTING THROUGHOUT THE CAREER OF JESUS.

"PROPER PEOPLE" WERE NOTICING AND COMPLAINING ABOUT THE KIND OF COMPANY THIS PRESUMPTUOUS YOUNG RABBI FROM

NAZARETH INSISTED ON KEEPING.

THE PROPER PEOPLE WEREN'T BAD. THEY WERE PROPER: POLITICALLY, SOCIALLY, MORALLY, RELIGIOUSLY. THEY WERE THE PILLARS OF SOCIETY. THEY ARE IDENTIFIED AS THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES: THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS. AND THEY DIDN'T LIKE IT AT ALL WHEN THIS YOUNG RABBI FROM NAZARETH PRESUMED TO COMMENT ON THEIR VALUES, WHILE SEEMING ALMOST TO GO OUT OF HIS WAY TO VIOLATE AND CONTRADICT THEM...NOWHERE AS BLATANTLY AS IN THE COMPANY HE KEPT. HOW IN THE WORLD CAN YOU BE A TEACHER OF RELIGION AND ASSOCIATE WITH "THOSE PEOPLE?"

"THOSE PEOPLE" WERE KNOWN TO THE PROPER PEOPLE AS SINNERS. THEY WERE ESSENTIALLY COMMON FOLK WHO HAD NEITHER THE TIME NOR THE RESOURCES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NICETIES OF FORMAL RELIGION.

Jesus spent a lot of time with these people: the outcasts, the underdogs, the poor.

So the picture is Jesus in the shabby home of one of these people, at table, eating. And a small cluster of people outside, Pharisees who wouldn't be caught dead in a house like that, peering in, seeing him and clucking, "Would you look at that! Who in the world does he think he is, associating with them and then presuming to lecture us?"

That's the kind of comment Jesus must have heard... And I sense that it was to his table companions, who were lost according to the accepted standards of religion, but also to the people peering in through the door who were just as surely lost, that he told these little stories.

THE FIRST ONE DRAWS ON AN IMAGE EVERYBODY LOVES - THE SHEPHERD. THIS SHEPHERD DOES SOMETHING A SHEPHERD WOULD NOT DO. HE LEAVES NINETY-NINE SHEEP ALONE TO TRACK DOWN ONE WHO WAS LOST. AND WHEN HE FINDS IT, HE LEAVES THE NINETY-NINE AGAIN WHILE HE CARRIES THE LITTLE LOST SHEEP TO THE VILLAGE FOR A HOMECOMING CELEBRATION.

THIS IS A COMPLICATED METAPHOR BUT ITS POINT IS BOTH CLEAR AND RADICAL. RELIGION THAT EXCLUDES AND DIVIDES IS WRONG RELIGION. TRUE RELIGION UNITES, INCLUDES, INVITES ALL TO TABLE. AND GOD... NOT THE HEAVENLY GATEKEEPER, CHECKING CREDENTIALS AT THE DOOR, BUT THE STRONG SHEPHERD WHO WILL GO WHEREVER NECESSARY TO MAKE SURE THAT ALL ARE INCLUDED.

THE SECOND STORY MAKES THE SAME POINT BUT WITH A MORE PROVOCATIVE CHARACTER, A WOMAN, HERSELF AN OUTCAST IN A SOCIETY WHICH WAS ABSOLUTELY PATRIARCHAL. SHE HAS LOST ONE COIN AND TURNS HER HOUSE INSIDE OUT UNTIL SHE FINDS IT.

NOT ONLY IS YOUR RELIGION WRONG, JESUS IS SAYING, WITH ALL ITS RULES AND REGULATIONS EXCLUDING PEOPLE, SO IS YOUR BASIC NOTION OF GOD. IN FACT, IT'S BECAUSE YOUR THEOLOGY IS SO OFF BASE, THAT YOUR RELIGION IS SO BAD. GOD, THE PRESUMPTUOUS RABBI FROM NAZARETH WAS PROPOSING, IS LIKE A SHEPHERD WHO GOES AFTER ONE LOST SHEEP AND STAYS AT IT UNTIL HE HAS FOUND THAT SHEEP AND BROUGHT IT SAFELY HOME. GOD IS LIKE THAT WOMAN - A BREATHTAKING SIMILE WHO WILL NOT STOP SEARCHING UNTIL SHE HAS FOUND THE LOST COIN.

THAT IS A VERY BASIC POSTURE WHICH DISTINGUISHES JUDEO/CHRISTIAN RELIGION. A HANDY DEFINITION OF RELIGION IS "THE HUMAN SEARCH FOR GOD."

BUT ONE OF OUR OLDEST IDEAS IS THAT GOD WORKS AT INCLUDING ALL: GOD THE SEEKER, THE PURSUER... IF RELIGION IS A SEARCH, THE ONE DOING THE SEARCHING IS GOD.

"WHITHER SHALL I GO FROM THY SPIRIT,

OR WHITHER SHALL I FLEE FROM THY PRESENCE?"

ASKED THE PSALMIST IN THOSE HAUNTING IMAGES.

"IF I TAKE THE WINGS OF THE MORNING

AND DWELL IN THE UTTERMOST PARTS OF THE SEA,

EVEN THERE THY HAND SHALL LEAD ME

AND THY RIGHT HAND SHALL HOLD ME."

That's a very different idea of God: not at all a gatekeeper, excluding all but those who have obeyed the rules, performed the duties, affirmed the creeds... this is a God who pursues, lovingly follows the lost sheep, keeps at it, even to the far reaches of time and space until the lost one is found. So Francis Thompson's mystic poetry...

"I fled Him, down the nights
and down the days
I fled him down the arches of the years:
I fled him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter...
From those strong feet that followed,

FOLLOWED AFTER."

[THE HOUND OF HEAVEN]

THERE ARE MANY PLACES TO GET LOST IN THE MIDDLE OF LIFE. AND IT'S NO SECRET THAT WHEN JESUS TALKED ABOUT THE HUMAN CONDITION HE RARELY USED CATEGORIES OF SIN BUT FREQUENTLY EMPLOYED METAPHORS OF LOSTNESS.

INTENSE SUFFERING AND PHYSICAL PAIN FEELS LIKE ABANDONMENT, WHICH IS A FORM OF LOSTNESS. "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?" JESUS CRIED OUT IN PAIN, AND IT WAS A CONFESSION OF RADICAL LOSTNESS NOT UNFAMILIAR TO US. THE DEATH OF SOMEONE YOU DEARLY LOVE IS A KIND OF LOSTNESS. SO IS THE RUPTURE OF ANY RELATIONSHIP THAT GROUNDS YOU, CENTERS YOU, TELLS YOU WHO AND WHERE YOU ARE. THE LOSS OF YOUR DREAM... THE HOPEFUL VISION WITH WHICH YOU BEGAN YOUR

ADULT LIFE AND WHICH AFTER MANY ALTERATIONS MUST BE DISCARDED - FEELS A LOT LIKE BEING CAST ADRIFT IN OPEN SEAS, LOST. THERE IS AN ENTIRE LITERATURE ABOUT THE MORAL LOSTNESS OF LIVING ENTIRELY FOR SELF, THE AIMLESSNESS OF A NARCISSISM MEASURED ONLY BY THE "STUFF" WE ARE ABLE TO ACCUMULATE.

SOME LOSTNESS IS SELF-IMPOSED.

SOME OF IT IS OUR STUBBORNNESS, OUR PRIDE, OUR SIN WHICH JESUS DOESN'T CONDEMN SO MUCH AS IDENTIFY IT AS LOSTNESS.

YOU HAVE TO WANT TO BE FOUND, I SUPPOSE. IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS YOU HAVE TO BE VULNERABLE, COME OUT OF HIDING. YOU HAVE TO OPEN AND EXPOSE SELF TO RISK AND PAIN AND LOVE AND ECSTASY. NO ONE CAN DO IT FOR YOU. PEOPLE WHO LOVE YOU CAN KEEP THE SEARCH GOING, KEEP PURSUING YOU, BUT IN LOVE, YOU HAVE TO

ALLOW YOURSELF FULLY TO GET FOUND.

AND SO IT IS WITH GOD.

HOW AND WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN? I THINK OUR BEING FOUND DEPENDS ON WHERE WE ARE LOST. I BELIEVE GOD FINDS US SOMETIMES...

- IN EXPERIENCES OF INTENSE PASSIONATE LOVE

- IN DEEP AND PROFOUND GRIEF

- IN EXPERIENCES OF BREATHTAKING AND HEARTSHATTERING BEAUTY

I THINK GOD FINDS US

- IN MOMENTS OF INSIGHT WHEN WE KNOW OUR OWN MORTALITY

- OUR SMALLNESS

- OUR WEAKNESSES

- OUR LOSTNESS.

EMILY DICKINSON, WHO THOUGHT A LOT ABOUT HOW GOD COMES TO US, WROTE:

"HE FUMBLES AT YOUR SPIRIT
AS PLAYERS AT THE KEYS

BEFORE THEY DROP FULL MUSIC ON;

HE STUNS YOU BY DEGREES..."

[THE MASTER]

AND ROBERT FULGHUM'S "GET FOUND, KID" WAS PUT MORE ELOQUENTLY BY FRANCIS THOMPSON - WHEN, AT THE END OF THE HOUND OF HEAVEN, THE CHASE IS OVER AND THE VOICE SAYS -

"RISE, CLASP MY HAND

AND COME!

AH, FONDEST, BLINDEST, WEAKEST

I AM HE WHOM THOU SEEKEST."

JESUS SAID SIMPLY -

"AND WHAT ONE OF YOU, HAVING A HUNDRED SHEEP... DOES NOT LEAVE THE NINETY-NINE AND GO AFTER THE ONE WHICH IS LOST UNTIL HE FINDS IT? GOD, I BELIEVE, PURSUES US WHEN WE ARE LOST... WHEN WE HIDE. GOD, I BELIEVE, SEARCHES FOR US ACROSS THE LABYRINTH OF YEARS WE ARE GIVEN.

We live by grace... we will be found... the matter rests in the hands of God...or...on the shoulders of God, if you will.

It's difficult to improve on the way the old hymn says it:

"Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,

But yet in love, he sought me,

And on his shoulder gently laid,

And home, rejoicing brought me."

Amen.